
ABOUT MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGES ONLINE JUNE 2006 SHARING BEST PRACTICES CONFERENCE

MICROCOSM OF ISSUES AND DISTANCE LEARNING DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract: *This paper summarizes trends and issues in online learning in the United States of America as reflected in the presentations of the Massachusetts Colleges Online "Sharing Best Practices in E-Learning" Conference held on June 13-14, 2006.*

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts' nine state-supported four-year colleges and its 15 two-year community colleges formed Massachusetts Colleges Online (MCO) in 2001 (MCO, 2006). Among the consortium's core missions were to exchange online courses among institutions and support the growth and development of distance learning in the state-run colleges. A visit to the organization's website shows that the member colleges have developed a pool of close to 1200 courses that are available to students worldwide. In an attempt to foster online learning development among the member institutions, an annual conference was initiated in 2004 with a theme appropriate to its mission: "Sharing Best Practices in E-Learning" (MCO, 2006).

The 48 presentations at the Third Annual MCO Conference, held on June 13-14, 2006 at Middlesex Community College in Lowell, MA, were initiated and offered principally by the faculty and administrators involved in MCO's online learning efforts. The themes and topics of the presentations serve as an excellent indication of the rapid evolution of online learning, and the practices, principles, and issues that currently concern Massachusetts practitioners, and reflect similar interests among other U.S. distance learning educational institutions. The following pages will summarize several of these major issues as indicated by an analysis of the conference's presentations.

There are many signs of online learning's near universal acceptance as a course delivery modality. The 2005 edition of the Sloan Consortium's annual survey "Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States" "...concludes that the breadth of online college courses may soon rival traditional face-to-face offerings. Survey results show more than three out of five institutions offering face-to-face undergraduate (63%) or graduate (65%) level courses also offer courses at the same level online. In addition, larger percentages (56%) of chief academic officers agree that online education is critical to their long-term strategy" (Sloan-C, 2005).

The U.S. Department of Education recognized the impact and growth of online learning in its recent report "Assuring Quality in Higher Education: Recommendations for Improving Accreditation" based on a series of discussions with the nation's regional and national college accrediting organizations (USDOE, 2006). A well-attended session at the MCO conference featured a presentation by an executive of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the organization that accredits MCO colleges. The USDE report was discussed along with NEASC's "Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs" white paper that suggests guidelines and highlights issues that may represent problem areas as college's offering online courses and programs undergo the accrediting renewal process (NEASC, 2006).

NEASC recently issued a "Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs." NEASC and the other accrediting entities have taken a national, as opposed to a regional, approach to developing accrediting standards that will serve as guides, as

colleges develop and assess their online education programs since "... new delivery systems are becoming increasingly important, with institutions developing national and international student populations enjoying only virtual residence, the regional commissions have sought and will continue to seek a significant degree of cross-regional consistency, compatible with their independence and autonomy, in evaluating these activities" (Statement, 2006).

Another presentation reported on the June 2006 National University Telecommunications Network conference devoted to the theme "Managing and Maintaining Quality in Distance Learning" (NUTN, 2006). In addition to the accrediting organizations' efforts, other online quality assurance initiatives have been developed to assist colleges to assess the quality of their distance learning programs such as the State of Maryland's "Quality Matters" Rubric (Quality, 2006), The Interactive Quality Assessment Tool (Iqat, 2006) the Baldrige National Quality Program (Baldrige, 2006), and the Sloan-C Pillars (Sloan-C, 2006).

Technological advancement and its role in online learning is manifest in the fact that seven of the MCO conference presentations dealt with the integration of faculty-produced audio and video sources into online courses. The easiest technology to add to a course is audio. The popularity of portable mp3 audio playback devices, most notably the Apple iPod system (Podcasting, 2006) and the recent development of portable units that deliver video as well as audio playback, is being viewed as a method of combining traditional features of classroom pedagogy into the online courses. Sessions were presented on creating "podcasts" that can be delivered to students via the commonly used course management systems Blackboard or WebCt or through Apples iTunes software.

Faculty incorporation of technology into their online courses is often dependent on the technology's ease of use. Audio "podcasts" have been implemented with minimal technological challenges. Some faculty have recorded portions of their on-campus course lectures and uploaded them into their online courses. Others record lectures, updates, and content explanations specifically for their online courses. iTunes software and RSS subscription feeds can download the content to the students whenever new audio files are posted by the instructor. (Podcasts, 2006)

As video technology becomes simpler for end users, some faculty are self-producing video segments and demonstrations and distributing through their college's streaming video servers using desktop computer video editing and recording software, such as Apple's iMovie (iMovie, 2006). At the opposite end of the video sophistication scale is a movement that is just beginning in the MCO system. The approach is to use high-level video/computer technology to automate the process of recording a faculty member's lectures along with all the visuals used in the class, dividing the content into segments based on the visuals, processing, and uploading the material to a streaming video server with minimal faculty awareness of the technological processes. The current high cost of implementing such automation is preventing its widespread use in state-funded institutions (Anystream, 2006; Accordant, 2006; Telecast, 2006; Viewcast, 2006).

However, other lower cost technologies are beginning to be championed and incorporated into online courses. One presentation demonstrated Microsoft Producer, which is a free download to licensed users of Microsoft Office's PowerPoint 2003 (Microsoft, 2006). The program allows an instructor to easily incorporate audio and video segments along with PowerPoint slides to create rich media presentations that can engage students and provide video online course support. The Microsoft Producer program compresses the final video product so that it can be posted on an ordinary web server.

Another presentation demonstrated Camtasia Studio, which is a low-cost software package that records real, full-motion video of anything on the computer screen with an audio voiceover (Camtasia, 2006). This product is ideal for demonstrating on-screen processes and to creating online tutorials, such as how to search a library database

or use a software program. Instructors have been using the product to reinforce concepts and to recreate for online students experiences that would normally be demonstrated in a face-to-face class. Still another presentation showed how an online instructor uses Macromedia Captivate software to create flash videos of step-by-step accounting and finance problems that are normally done in the classroom (Macromedia, 2006).

One of the principle concerns of NEASC and other accrediting organizations is that an institution offering online courses "...recognizes that appropriate service must be available for students of electronically offered programs, using the working assumption that these students will not be physically present on campus" (Best Practices). Several presentations dealt with one of the most challenging of these concerns: how colleges can provide tutoring services to online students. It appears that many of the MCO institutions try to extend tutoring services by creating electronic components for the activities that are normally delivered on campus, such as library instruction and online writing labs. Pilot projects using commercial firms that provide online tutoring services have been successful for the most part, but the institutions have universally agreed that the cost generally has prevented them from expanding the scope of these services.

One presentation outlined an MCO 2006-07 academic year pilot project in which seven of its members will partner with the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium's eTutoring program (CTDLC, 2006). This will allow the MCO colleges to join the five-year-old CTDLC program in order to provide MCO students with a full complement of online tutoring services. As participants, the MCO colleges will use a CTDLC designed and developed web-based platform. Professional tutors in a variety of topics will be trained at MCO pilot institutions, and will contribute weekly tutoring hours to the CTDLC pool. The hours are aggregated into a schedule that provides students with online tutoring resources seven days a week from early morning through late evening.

The topic of the MCO Conference keynote presentation is a national and international example of the trend to collaborate and share in the online education world. Executive Director Dr. Gerard L. Hanley of the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) described and demonstrated the project (MERLOT, 2006). MERLOT, designed for higher education faculty and students, is a free, open online service that provides a continually growing collection of online learning materials, assignments, and reviews. According to Hanley "MERLOT helps faculty enhance instruction by providing easy access to online materials connected to strategies for integrating them into teaching and learning" (Hanley, 2006).

In a follow-up workshop, Hanley detailed how publishing in the MERLOT international academic community is becoming part of a faculty member's portfolio for tenure and promotion at many institutions. Among MERLOT's international partners are Canada's Co-operative Learning Object Exchange, Europe's Ariadne Foundation, and Australia's EdNA Online (CLOE, 2006; Ariadne, 2006; EdNA, 2006). Hanley also demonstrated how the MERLOT service allows faculty to browse and search the collection of learning objects, learn from peer reviews of the content, create personal collections of MERLOT resources, and browse and participate in the Virtual Speakers Bureau (MERLOT, 2006).

The above analysis demonstrates that the dynamic nature and rapid growth of the online learning modality is making a strong impact on higher education. Faculty and administrators need to be continually aware of the changes that online learning introduces to the traditional nature of higher education. Conferences such as MCO's "Sharing Best Practices" are invigorating as one becomes excited by the many developments and improvements to course design and delivery. Yet, such summits can also bring one the revelation that it can be a nearly overwhelming challenge to keep up with such change.

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